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MALAKUTA OF YUAN CHWANG

MALAKŪṬA OF YUAN CHWANG.

K. A. NILAKANTA SASTRI.

Yuan Chwang's Account.—Yuan Chwang's account of Malakūṭa has baffled many commentators and though the balance of opinion has been in favour of the identification of Malakūṭa with the Pāṇḍya country, there still hangs some amount of uncertainty about the question, and no apology is needed for an attempt to re-examine the subject in the light of the evidence from the literature and epigraphy of the Tamil country. The main facts in the pilgrim's account of the country are well-known, and from the point of view of this discussion they may be summed up as follows:¹ (1) the country of Mo-lo-kiu-tcha (Malakūṭa) was 3000 *li* or so south of Kāñcīpura (Kin-chi-pu-lo). (2) It was about 5000 *li* in circuit, (3) the capital was about 40 *li*, the soil brackish and barren, the temperature hot, and the men dark-complexioned, but firm and imperious in disposition. Some followed the true doctrine, others were given to heresy. They did not esteem learning much, but were wholly given to commercial gain. Hinduism and Jainism (Nigranthas) were more flourishing than Buddhism of which many old convents were in ruins, including one built by Mahendra 'not far to the east' of the capital. (4) On the south of this country, bordering the sea, are the Mo-la-ye (Malaya) mountains on which is found the white Sandalwood tree. (5) To the east of the Malaya mountains is Mt. Po-ta-lo-kia (Potalaka), on the top of which is a lake; its waters are clear as a mirror. From a hollow proceeds a great river which encircles the mountain twenty times as it flows down and then enters the Southern sea. (6) Going north-east from this mountain, on the border of the sea, is a town whence they start for the Southern sea and the country of San-kia-lo (Ceylon). Sinhala is commonly said to be 3000 *li* to the south-east of this port.

The portion of the Chinese text corresponding to the foregoing summary is apparently not as trustworthy as the bulk of the itinerary², and it would be well not to look for even as much

¹ See Beal, *Buddhist Records*, II, 230 ff. ² Watters—*Yuan Chwang*, ii, 233.

precision here with regard to bearings and distances as is to be found for the rest of the pilgrim's journey.

Did Yuan Chwang visit Malakūṭa?—One question that has caused a considerable amount of discussion is whether the pilgrim actually visited the country of Malakūṭa or gave an account of it only from hearsay. Watters expresses himself with great caution, and his views are entitled to the consideration that is due to the latest and one of the most searching students of the records of the pilgrim. Referring to the statement in the *Life* which has led to the belief that the pilgrim did not visit Malakūṭa, this is what Watters says: ¹

‘As this is not very clear and as the direction is not given we should not lightly accept this statement. There is nothing in the pilgrim's account of the country to show that he did not visit it and see its capital and the district around, although he may not have gone to remote objects of interest.’

Again, referring to Yuan Chwang's description of the monastery near the capital of Malakūṭa, Watters observes: ²

‘The account of this monastery and its Asoka *tope* of which only the dome remained visible is apparently that of a visitor at the time of the description.’

Lastly: ³

‘If we had only the records we should be at liberty to believe that he proceeded to Ceylon and returned thence to Drāviḍa.’

Watters, however, adds: ⁴

‘But it is perhaps better to regard him as writing about Malakūṭa and Ceylon from information given to him in Drāviḍa, and from books.’

The halting tone of Watters' observations appears to have arisen partly from his oversight of the political condition of Southern India at the time of the pilgrim's visit. His remark ⁵ that the pilgrim does not tell us anything about the nature of the country between Drāviḍa and Malakūṭa is perfectly correct; but there is nothing in this to point to the inference that ‘he may not have gone to Malakūṭa’ (Watters). In the middle of the seventh century A.D., the only considerable power in Southern India besides the Pallavas was that

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 230.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

of the Pāṇḍyas whose sway extended over all the territory that lay to the south of the Pallava dominion. If we accept the view that Yuan Chwang's Drāviḍa and Malakūṭa were the Pallava and the Pāṇḍya countries respectively,¹ there was indeed no intermediate country between these of which the pilgrim could tell us anything. It appears, therefore, right to follow the indication in the records to which Watters has drawn such pointed attention rather than the vague statement in the Life that Yuan Chwang was talking from hearsay.

The interpretation of the data.—We are unable to say how far the indication of the distances and the bearings given by the pilgrim are to be accepted literally. Burnell who was among the earliest to discuss the identification of Malakūṭa² in the light of Tamil evidence felt that there was no means of controlling and checking these data given by the pilgrim. Cunningham in his *Ancient Geography*³ remarked that 3000 *li* to the south of Kāñcīpuram would take us far out into the sea to the south of cape Comorin, and Hultzsch accepted that statement. On the other hand, Mr. S. N. Majumdar is quite content to accept the 3000 *li* and remarks that 3000 *li* to the south of Kāñcīpuram will not take us so much to the south. 'The ancient road to the South of Kāñchī passed through Tirukōilur, Trichinopoly (Uṛaiyūr), Tanjore district and Koḍumbai to Madura the Capital of the Pāṇḍyas and this route makes up the distance of 3000 *li*'.⁴ These remarks of Mr. Majumdar are of course to be understood in the light of his discussion of the length of a *li* in his introduction, pp. xxxi-xxxiii. But whether the distances given by the pilgrim work out so nicely as Mr. Majumdar has it in this instance or not, one cannot have any hesitation in declining to follow the rather drastic emendation of the pilgrim's figures suggested by Cunningham. In a long and complex record such as that of Yuan Chwang's itinerary in a foreign country the indication of directions and distances must necessarily have been approximate.

¹ It is immaterial for the very limited purpose of this argument if the capital of Drāviḍa was Kāñcīpuram as is usually believed, or Negapatam as Fergusson and Watters are inclined to think. *J.R.A.S. (N.S.)*, vi, pp. 265-7; Watters, ii, 227. But it is very difficult to accept Fergusson's view that the port of embarking for Ceylon to the N.—E. of Mt. Potalaka was identical with the capital of Drāviḍa.

² *Ind. Ant.*, VII, 39-40.

³ pp. 628-30 (ed. S. N. Majumdar Sastri, 1924).

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 741.

With whatever defects of method Cunningham must be held to have arrived at a substantially sound identification of 'Malaya-kūṭa' (as he renders the name) in his statement¹ that 'the province of Malayakūṭa must have included the modern districts of Tanjore and Madura on the East with Coimbatore, Cochin, and Travancore on the West.' It must be observed that the area so indicated would roughly correspond to the Pāṇḍyan kingdom as it was in the days when Yuan Chwang came to South India.²

Burnell made an unfortunate attempt to upset this identification and identify Malakūṭa with a part of the Tanjore district round about the modern city of Kumbhakōṇam. Some years later Hultzsch, in his paper on the country of Malakūṭa,³ conclusively disproved Burnell's thesis and went far to establish Cunningham's initial identification in the light of South Indian literature and epigraphy. But even so Burnell's attempt has produced an aftermath long after his day. Venkayya⁴ equates Malakūṭa with Malaikūṛṇam and draws attention to a passage in the commentary of the *Vīrasōḷiyam* where he found mention of a Malaikūṛṇam. This is very unfortunate, for the only printed edition of the *Vīrasōḷiyam*, which is also the one to which Mr. Venkayya gives reference, mentions not Malaikūṛṇam but Mālaikkūṛṇam as the native district of the author of the *Vīrasōḷiyam*. As we do not know of a Malaikūṛṇam from any other source, we cannot help thinking that the text of the commentary here is not correctly preserved. It must also be observed that *Mīlalaikkūṛṇam* will fit perfectly into the stanza. My attempts to determine the correct reading by consulting MSS. of the work have so far failed as none of the MSS. in the Madras Library contains this part of the commentary. On the other hand Mr. K. V. Subrahmanya Aiyar⁵ has tried to uphold the identification of Malakūṭa with Mīlalaikkūṛṇam and has stated that there are reasons to believe that this division covered a large area surrounding Madura. Whatever the plausibility of the equation of Malakūṭa with *Mīlalaikkūṛṇam*, there is absolutely no evidence for the statement that Mīlalaikkūṛṇam covered a large area surrounding Madura. The evidence of Tamil literature and epigraphy taken together would show that Mīlalaikkūṛṇam included

¹ *Op. cit.*, 629.

² *The Pāṇḍyan Kingdom, Ch. V.*

³ *Ind. Ant.*, XVIII, pp. 239 ff.

⁴ *Annual Report, Epigraphy*, Madras, 1899, paragraph 50.

⁵ *Ancient Dekhan*, 115 ff.

within itself places like Kālaiyārkōvil, Tuñjalūr and others which shows that it was the name of a division of the country near the eastern coast on the border land between the modern districts of Ramnad and Tanjore.¹ As a matter of fact, the more one considers the matter the more it seems to be necessary to abandon the attempt to find in the latter part of the word *Malakūṭa* a rendering of the Tamil *Kūrṟam* or *Kōṭṭam*. It does not seem more likely either, *pace* Hultsch, that the first half of the word ‘*mala*’ corresponds to Tamil ‘*malai*’. There is more to be said, it would appear, for the suggestion of Cunningham that the Chinese pilgrim’s *Malakūṭa* must be equated to *Malayakūṭa*. Watters has, indeed, suggested that the geographical names given by the Chinese pilgrim might have been drawn by him from his knowledge of Buddhist literature and that it may not always be possible to find geographical equivalents satisfying all the conditions of the narrative concerning Mo-lo-ku-t-cha. Watters says for instance² of the Malaya Mountain: ‘It was in reality a poetical creation to which the semblance of earthly reality was given by the use of well-known names, a district of Utopia with a topical definition’. Again of Potalaka of the scriptures³ the same writer says that it ‘is not to be identified with any one of the mountains by the sea-side in South India’. But it must be doubted whether in making these statements Watters does not carry scepticism beyond legitimate bounds. After all, if we take the general impression produced on the mind by the pilgrim’s statement and compare with it the general impression which anyone familiar with the headwaters of the Tāmraparṇi carries in his mind about the mountain range known as the Podigai in Tamil literature—special attention may be drawn to the mention of the sandalwood tree, the lake of clear water and the river which on its way to the sea flowed round the mountain⁴—there would be little room for doubt that in Malaya we have a reference to the southernmost portion of the Western Ghats and that in the Potalaka we must recognise, with Hultsch, the well-known Podigai or Podiyil.⁵ Beal, indeed, thought of the identity of Potalaka with Tamil Podigai, but abandoned it rather

¹ See *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, p. 606 n; and my *Pāṇḍyan Kingdom*, p. 28 and n. 4.

² Watters—*Yuan Chwang*, ii, 230. ³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 231-2.

⁴ It is even now believed in the district of Tinnevely that the Tāmraparṇi flows round its source, the mountain of Agastya, before it reaches the plain.

⁵ *Ind. Ant.*, XVIII, p. 241.

hastily. Beal abandoned the idea because he thought that he had to look for Podigai somewhere in the Nilgris. He remarked:¹ '3000 *li* to the south of Conjeeveram and still south of that and east again of this cannot bring us to the Nilgri hills. Nor do we know of any peak there sacred as a place of pilgrimage and the residence of a Bodhisattva or a *dēva*, with a lake on the top and a river flowing into the Southern sea.' In any case his suggestion that Potalaka must refer to Adam's Peak in Ceylon is impossible to accept if only for the reason that the pilgrim states that to the north-east of Potalaka on the sea-side was a city from which people embarked for Ceylon.

In Tamil literature the name Podigai or Podiyil is applied to the southernmost section of the Western Ghats; and although Ptolemy seems to apply his term Bittiga to the whole section of the Western Ghats extending from the Coimbatore gap to Cape Comorin,² still it is well to remember that Tamil literary usage confines the term Podigai to that section in the extreme south lying between the headwaters of the Tāmbraparni and the Cape Comorin. Thus the *Śilappadikāram*³ mentions the *Podiyil* and the *Imayam*, evidently as mountains in the extreme South and North of India, and again refers to a pilgrim who goes round the sacred Podiyil mountain after bathing in Kumari. These indications from Tamil literary usage would go a long way to justify Yuan Chwang's location of Potalaka to the South of Malakūṭa; and when he says that Potalaka was to the East of Malaya Mountain we have perhaps to understand a distinction between parallel ranges of the Western Ghats in that part of the country. And there is a great deal of force in Hultzsch's suggestion⁴ that the pilgrim reports as legends relating to Avalokiteśvara what he heard of the popular beliefs concerning the sage Agastya. In fact it appears to have been commonly believed by the Buddhists of the Tamil land that Agastya learned his Tamil from Avalokiteśvara before he gave it to the world. This becomes clear from the opening verses of the *Vīraśōḷiyam*, a work of the eleventh century A.D., in which the author Buddhāmītra writes:

¹ *J.R.A.S.* (N.S.), XV, p. 338.

² *Ind. Ant.*, XIII, p. 337.

³ Canto i, l. 14 and xxvii, ll. 68-9.

⁴ *Ind. Ant.*, XVIII, p. 241.

‘Āyungunattavalōkitan
pakkal Agattiyan kēṭ-
tēyumbuvanikkiyambiya
taṇḍamil’.

‘The sweet Tamil which Agastya expounded to a worthy world after learning it from Avalōkita of praiseworthy qualities.’ What was Agastya’s hill ordinarily might, therefore, have been regarded as Avalōkita’s hill by the Southern Buddhists.

The name Malakūṭa or Malayākūṭa is, indeed, unique and difficult to explain from the Indian side in that form; but in general, there seems to be no difficulty in accepting the pilgrim’s specifications as referring to different parts of the Pāṇḍyan kingdom as it was in the days of his pilgrimage. His references to the barren nature of that part of the country, its active sea-borne commerce, the Malaya mountain and the Potalaka and the lake of clear water and the stream flowing from it and his reference to the port of embarkation to Ceylon which lay to the north-east of that mountain—all these fit in well enough with what we know of the Pāṇḍyan kingdom, of which the capital which he does not name but which was about 40 *li* in circuit was no doubt old Madura. It is quite likely that if a careful excavation is undertaken to the east of the site of the old city in the neighbourhood of the modern Madura, the pilgrim’s reference to the ruined *tope* and the monastery finds corroboration.

There is confirmation of the scheme of identifications upheld in this discussion from another Chinese writer. Writing towards the end of the 8th century A.D. Kia Tan says of Ceylon¹ that ‘its northern coast is 100 *li* from the south coast of Southern India. Then towards the west after four days’ journey we cross the country of *Mo-lai* which is the extreme southern part of Southern India’. In this Molai we may perhaps recognise Malaya, the first half of Yuan Chwang’s Malakūṭa, and Kia Tan’s testimony is valuable because of its definite statement that the country of *Mo-lai* was the extreme south of Southern India.

¹ *B.E.F.E.O.*, *iv*, p. 359.